

Towards a theory of social development

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und Wirklichkeit, zwischen Betrachtung und Beobachtung“ wieder herzustellen. Ob es sich deshalb eher empfiehlt, Merton zu folgen, der von seiner Auffassung gesagt hat, daß es sich „weniger um allgemeine Theorie handelt, als um Theorien, also generalisierende Schlußfolgerungen aus Beobachtungen“, diese Frage ließ Professor Beerling offen. Er schloß mit einem Hinweis auf die Feststellung von R. Dahrendorf, daß seit 1945 kein deutscher Beitrag zu den fundamentalen Problemen der Soziologie erschienen sei.

Hier wurde die Diskussion zunächst unterbrochen und es folgte der Vortrag von Professor Ginsberg.

MORRIS GINSBERG

Towards a theory of social development

I should like to begin by expressing my deep appreciation of the honour you have done me by inviting me to take part in your deliberations. In thinking about a theme on which to address you it seemed best not to dwell so much on the past achievements of German sociology as on the present situation and future needs. I should like in this context to put forward a plea for a revival of interest in the idea of the evolution or development of man and in the part played by rational factors in development.

I am well aware that the present climate of opinion is favourable neither to the rationalist nor to the evolutionary outlook. To many it would seem that both belong to an age now past and done with. But I can see no good reason for accepting this verdict. On the contrary, now is the time when it is of the greatest importance to reassert our belief in human reason, in the fundamental unity of mankind, in the reality of progress and the possibility of further progress.

The idea of development here envisaged must be distinguished from that pursued by the Idealist philosophies of history and their Marxist variants. I am not advocating a return to metaphysical notions of an Absolute Mind reaching self-consciousness in the historical process. Nor do I believe that we can say in advance that the process is unitary, or shaped decisively by any one factor or tendency towards a predestined end. The empirical evidence suggests that in the course of history man is slowly rationalised and moralised. But the manner and the pace in which reason comes to pervade the various spheres of human activity varies greatly from case to case. The development of the social structure, the development of science, the development of religion and morals each follow their own course in partial independence from the rest, and their relations to each other are variable

and complex. The various developments differ in their rate of change, in the readiness with which advances can be transmitted from one centre to others and in their liability to retrogression. Nevertheless, in the long run they are broadly correlated. The problem of sociology in its evolutionary aspect is to define the nature of this correlation and to discover its conditions.

In the case of knowledge and its applications the reality of development and of progress in development is not in doubt. Knowledge is a system which grows not by sheer cumulation or accretion, but by a process of correlated change. Changes in one part or sphere induce or necessitate changes in others. The absorption of new data suggests revision or reconstruction of old concepts and the reconstruction in turn may suggest further inquiry. But correlated change in a system that maintains its identity through modification is precisely what is meant by development. Furthermore, in this case we have a standard of value in the light of which progress can be estimated. Advance in knowledge is judged, I take it, not by reference to final or absolute truth, nor even by agreement with first principles taken as beyond doubt, but by the degree of consistency and mutual support attained by the explanations offered and by the range or inclusiveness of the experience covered. Finality is not expected, but we look for increasing coherence, a widening of experience, a better balance between the conceptual and experiential modes of inquiry, a growth in the capacity for self-criticism and reconstruction – in short, increasing systematisation of experience. What reason claims is not that it can attain final truth here and now, but that it is the method of growth in understanding. The concept of development is thus essential in interpreting the nature of human thought. In other words, human thought is to be conceived as an organic structure which maintains itself by the mutual support of its parts, growing and modifying itself as it grows, but maintaining a recognisable identity through modification.

I believe that the concept of development is essential also for the interpretation of morality. In working out this idea, however, we must avoid the mistake of the early theories of progress of identifying moral with intellectual progress, or of assuming that „enlightenment“, virtue and happiness necessarily go together. In our age it is only too obvious that knowledge can be used for evil purposes, especially when to the power over nature is added the power over the minds of men. Any theory of moral progress has to face the patent and glaring failure of men to learn from experience and their inability to make use of such wisdom as there is in the ordering of human affairs. Every such theory must take into consideration not only the elements of advance but also of retrogression and, more particularly, the terrifying recrudescence of cruelty and barbarism in our own time, and

the nauseating mixture of moralism und power politics in the dealing of nations with each other.

In dealing with this question we must not commit ourselves either to a doctrine of the indefinite perfectibility of man, or of ineradicable, original sin. The facts call for no such heroic hypotheses. As far as the individual is concerned, the difficulties that lie in the way of his rationalisation and moralisation are plain enough. Modern psychology has brought out the strength of unconscious and repressed instinctive drives and their imperviousness to reason. It has shown how reason itself may be used to defeat reason, and in what numerous ways cognition and emotion may be dissociated, producing a sort of indifference or apathy, robbing knowledge of its power to influence action. As regards the part played by reason in social development, it has to be remembered that moral advance does not depend only on improvement in moral conceptions, but also on the extent to which improvements in ideas are embodied in institutions and through them lead to improvements in actual conduct. These changes clearly do not move in harmony. Furthermore, it is important to lay stress on the fact that there is no unitary mind guiding the action or the growth of societies. The sources of action are in innumerable distinct centres. In view of this, the surprising thing is not the failure but the degree of success attained, the extent to which out of the blindness and mutual frustration common needs to come to be recognised, leading slowly to the formation of a common purpose or common purpose.

There is nothing in the facts to invalidate, and much to confirm, the conclusion that in the course of historical development man is slowly moralised, and that he does so in proportion as he becomes more rational. By this, of course, is not meant that there is a genetic change in inborn equipment. Men are not born more intelligent or more virtuous than in former ages. What is asserted is that the collective achievements of mankind as embodied in tradition and changing with it come to approximate more closely to rational requirements. In the case of knowledge the criteria of advance are not in dispute. I believe that very similar criteria are applicable to morals. I have elsewhere suggested that there are five closely related but distinguishable criteria by which moral systems may be compared¹). The five criteria are:

1. The differentiation of morality from custom, law and religion, involving the recognition of values and obligations as self-sustained and independent of external sanctions.

2. Universalisation, i. e. the extension of the range of persons to whom common moral principles are applied and growing impartiality in their application. This trend has involved not only a firmer grasp of principles

¹) Cf. Reason and Experience in Ethics (Oxford University Press, 1956).

but a widening of the range of sympathy and the power of imaginative identification.

3. Comprehensiveness and flexibility, i. e. openness to new values and greater sensitivity and differentiation in response.

4. Systematic connectedness as judged by increasing coherence between various moral judgements and articulation of underlying principles.

5. Capacity for self-criticism and self-direction, as judged, more particularly, by the extent to which impartial investigation of the facts and critical scrutiny of the ends pursued is allowed to shape public policy.

It is easy to see that advance in one direction does not necessarily involve advance in others. Thus a system may be internally coherent, but narrow and exclusive, and thus fail to satisfy the criterion of universality. Again, a system may be comprehensive in the sense of covering wide areas of life, but if it relies on coercion or other external sanctions it fails to satisfy the criterion of differentiation as defined above. Thus the general level of development depends on the extent to which the various criteria tend to be satisfied in harmony. In other words, the value of a moral system as a whole depends on the coherence and objectivity of the concepts it employs, the degree to which its underlying assumptions have been elicited and on the part played by self-critical thought in the various spheres of economic and political life. It depends also on the way in which the line is drawn between internal and external sanctions, that is, the spheres which are left to the free choice of the individual and those which are held to call for social control. The distinctions which in the course of history have come to be drawn between the sphere of law and the sphere of morals, or between spiritual and temporal powers, are from the point of view here adopted of the greatest importance in estimating the general level of moral development.

On the more general question of social progress as distinguished from progress in morality I can here point only very briefly to certain general trends which seem to me to be important in this context. Firstly, there is the gradual moralisation of religion. The distinction sometimes drawn between nature-religions and ethical-religions is perhaps not warranted, as there appear to be moral elements in all religions. But it seems clear that both the conception of the divine and that of an after-life are gradually transformed by moral insight, and that in the later phases there is even a tendency to identify the spiritual with the ethical. The demand is then made that religious beliefs must satisfy ethical tests.

Next, there is the trend to the unification and rationalisation of the legal systems of the world. That the rationalisation is not purely technical or formal can be seen from the attempts increasingly made in later phases to

base legislation on some conception of well-being, and to use law as an instrument of social policy. The unification achieved is very impressive. I do not know how many independent legal systems there are, possibly ten or so, and most of them are hybrids. The systems derived from Roman law and the common law of England between them have been accepted by rather more than half of mankind. In the Asian and African world there is now a growing demand for the modernisation of the law, and this must make for further unification. There is here strong evidence of growth in self-direction and the rational ordering life in mankind as a whole, over-leaping political boundaries and differences in political organisation.

Finally, there are certain economic developments which, despite the obvious and deep-seated conflicts which still divide the peoples of the world, point to a certain convergence of aims. There is a growing recognition that the function of economic activity is, or ought to be, to supply the material conditions of well-being for all, and that the scope of useful intervention by society, whether in the form of State action, or action by other collective agencies is, and under modern conditions must necessarily be, much larger than was formerly supposed. The limits are largely practical and technical, and they vary with the level of development. Thus what the State can and ought to do in countries with a highly differentiated social structure, an active public opinion capable of initiating movements for peaceful change and offering resistance to monopolistic powers, must obviously be very different from what the State can and ought to do in dealing with a population inert politically, and not sufficiently diversified to secure diffusion of power. The problem cannot be satisfactorily defined in terms of the antithesis between individualism and collectivism, and it changes in character at different levels of economic and political development. While at some stages the use of State powers is needed to liberate the individual, at others the State tends to become tyrannical, unless held in check by other organised bodies within it. The individual may then have to be protected against these other bodies, for the division of powers may mean a multiplication of tyrannies. The Western societies meet the problems thus arising in different ways. But they have in common, perhaps, the general conviction that the important thing is to avoid giving too much power either to the State or to any other organised groups within it. In communist countries the problems involved take a different form owing to the fusion and concentration of economic and political power. Whether they will succeed in overcoming the dangers of over-concentration and pass to a phase in which both power and responsibility will be more widely diffused, remains to be seen. I am not suggesting that there is agreement on the various points involved. But I think there is a certain convergence in diagnosis and this may make for greater agreement in the future. I think

further that in the world as a whole there is a certain convergence of opinion about the principles of distributive justice. Egalitarianism is gaining ground in the sense that it is increasingly felt that differences in distribution have to be justified either by showing that they are required, either in the interests of efficiency, or as necessary conditions of well-being, and that in any case they ought not to be of a magnitude likely to endanger the minimum to which all are entitled. In varying degrees the societies that have moved in this direction are in the line of progress.

The principal conclusions which emerge from this discussion may be summed up as follows:

Firstly, progress in human evolution consists in the growth of rationality, that is, the systematic organisation of experience.

Secondly, the concept of rationality applies to action as well as to thought. The criteria of advance are substantially the same for both spheres.

Thirdly, the organisation of action consists, partly, in the use made of the knowledge of nature to serve human ends, partly in disclosing the nature of those ends and the construction of ideal ends. Whether the advance makes for social progress depends not only on the growth of knowledge and of moral insight, but on the extent to which such knowledge and insight are embodied in social institutions and through them shape behaviour and mould character.

Fourthly, development is very uneven in different spheres of thought and action. The changes that occur in the social and economic structure, in the growth of scientific knowledge and in the ethico-religious outlook are no doubt in the long run broadly correlated. But we know little of the conditions affecting this growing correlation. Hence the difficulties of prediction.

Finally, though no laws of social development have been discovered, some long range trends in the history of humanity can be clearly discerned. These show progress along certain lines and they establish the possibility, though by no means the certainty, of further progress.

*

Die Verbindung aus dem Vortrag von Ginsberg zu der Thematik des Symposiums und der vorangegangenen Diskussion fand Professor Kraft in Schelers These von der Machtlosigkeit des Geistes in der Geschichte, die Becker zitiert hatte. Aus seinen amerikanischen Erfahrungen hob Professor Kraft hervor, in Deutschland sei die Wirksamkeit der Vernunft in der Geschichte, das nämlich, was Hegel spirituell konstruiert hat, empirisch nicht ausgenutzt worden. Er verwies dabei auf „The Life of Reason“ von Santayana, ein Werk, das bis heute nicht ins Deutsche übersetzt und in